MOCKED
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Psalm 130
Matthew 27:1–2, 11–31

I understand that people want to be safe, polite, obedient, comfortable,
but that's not being alive. Iranaeus, the great early church father,
said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive.
Now, if you back off from every little controversy in your life
you're not alive, and what's more, you're boring.
It's a terrible thing that we settle for so much less.

William Sloane Coffin Jr.
in *The Life of Meaning*
Bob Abernethy and William Bole

There is an ancient legend that on foggy, misty nights the ghost of Pontius Pilate appears over the surface of a lake, high up in the Swiss Alps. He is washing his hands and saying over and over again, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

The great Renaissance poet Dante put Pontius Pilate in hell, or very near to it. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is regarded as one of the great, formative works in Western literature. You may recall struggling through it, or portions of it, as I do. What I do remember about it is that the poet Virgil is taking Dante on a tour of the afterlife, beginning with hell. Over the entrance to hell there is a sign: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here." And there at the vestibule to hell itself, not quite in and certainly not outside, there is Pontius Pilate. The vestibule is the place not for history's monstrous sinners, but for the opportunists, those who would not commit but tried to remain neutral. The people in the vestibule to hell run about eternally, never getting anywhere, never making a decision, a commitment. Among them is Pontius Pilate.

His is the only name, besides Mary, the mother of Jesus, remembered in the Apostles' Creed, our oldest, orderly statement of Christian faith. Every week we say, about Jesus, "suffered under Pontius Pilate." His name is recognized before most of the other individuals in the Bible. He is an interesting and enigmatic figure who plays a major role in the Christian story and the

passion of Jesus Christ. And he does it, essentially, by trying not to, by trying, terribly unsuccessfully, to avoid the whole nasty business.

On Thursday night of the last week of his life, Jesus ate a final meal with his disciples; prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane; was betrayed by Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve; was arrested by a mob and taken, in the middle of the night, to the residence of the chief priest. There a court was assembled. There has always been scholarly debate, and doubt, about whether it was the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel, or, more probably, a hastily assembled group of conspirators acting like a court. Jesus was interrogated, and during that long night, his closest friend, Peter, denied ever knowing Jesus—three times. Ultimately Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy, a capital crime, but because the Romans were in charge, the Jewish court did not have the authority to carry out the sentence.

Now it's Friday morning. It's unlikely Jesus slept at all that night. Jesus is taken to the Roman governor, who is staying, at the moment, at the palace of Herod, the puppet king the Romans have allowed to remain in office. But the real power in the region is the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, whose headquarters is in Caesarea, on the coast, but who has come to Jerusalem with a cohort of legionnaires to demonstrate Roman authority during the volatile days of the Passover. So Jesus is brought to Pilate. The Romans don't care about blasphemy. In fact, the Romans never have understood their Jewish subjects and, four decades later in 70 CE, will tire of the relentless arguing, the rebellions, the fierce Jewish determination to be ruled by no one but their God and will finally invade, destroy Jerusalem and its temple, and kill and disperse the population in a terrible war that will end finally at the fortress of Masada. Israel would cease to exist until 1947.

Pilate interrogates Jesus privately. It's an interesting exchange. "Are you really the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks. It's sarcasm. Jesus is a peasant, from Galilee, the countryside. His clothes are shabby; he's been up all night; he's been punched and slapped. His hands are tied behind him. "You're a king?" Pilate asks. And Jesus responds—in fact it's the only thing he says during the whole process—"You said it, not me." And then he falls silent, refuses to answer any more questions. It is a holy, courageous silence, a silence that resists authority, a silence that Pilate has never seen before. He's used to prisoners begging for mercy, arguing their case, or spewing curses and contempt. He marvels at the holy Good Friday silence of this strange man, Jesus.

Pilate knows he's innocent. He tries to do the right thing, remembers that it is a custom to release a popular prisoner during the holidays. He walks out onto the porch with Jesus, offers to release him. The crowd shouts for Barabbas—a real criminal.

Now, I must pause and think about the crowd. Under the influence of Hollywood, I have always assumed that there was a huge crowd assembled in a public square that Friday morning, a large, hateful crowd of religious zealots clamoring cruelly for Jesus' death. That picture, and the blood-curdling thing Matthew says the crowd said later, is the source of a lot of anti-Semitism. In their fine study *The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that it wasn't a huge crowd but maybe a few dozen people, carefully recruited to show up to demand Jesus' execution.

Pilate releases Barabbas. Pilate's wife, Matthew says, watching all this, sends a message. "He's innocent. Have nothing to do with this sordid affair." Pilate tries a second time, takes Jesus back out onto the porch. "What do you want me to do with him? He's done nothing wrong." "Crucify him!" the crowd says. And Pilate, experienced politician, makes his decision. Executing the prisoner is not right, but it is the lesser of two wrongs. Releasing him might be more controversial, more threatening to the peace of the city. So in one of history's most dramatic and haunting gestures, he calls for a bowl of water and washes his hands publicly. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he tries to say, as he turns Jesus over to a detail of his soldiers for execution.

Soldiers, miles from home, in a place they do not want to be, mostly bored, contemptuous of the population they are ordered to occupy and pacify, not sure who is friend and who is enemy, can behave badly, as we have been reminded. So for their own amusement these soldiers abuse their Jewish prisoner. They don't know anything about him, other than he's convicted of sedition—he wants to be king, of all things. So in one of the saddest events in the Bible, they mock him: "You want to be king? We'll make you a king!" They strip him, put a scarlet robe on him, a crown on his head, made quickly and crudely of thorns (the equivalent of barbed wire), a reed scepter in his hand—a mock royal court—slapping, punching, "Hail the King! Hail the King of the Jews!" Jesus still silent—until they tire of it and take him to complete their assignment.

There is a room in Jerusalem said to be the place where that happened, built over and around many times. The room is small. Into the stone floor is carved a kind of tic-tac-toe game Roman soldiers played to while away the time. Whether or not it is the place, to stand in it is to know something of the poignancy of what happened so many years ago—the courage of that lonely, brave man standing silently, his life now out of his control, a prisoner of the most powerful force in the world, in holy silence, with his crown of thorns, reed scepter, mocked. And it is to know something of Pilate's pathetic effort to wash his hands of the whole affair.

Matthew says that crowd cried, "His blood be on us and on our children." Some think Matthew made that up to exonerate the Romans. Others, Borg

and Crossan, say the crowd did not represent the sentiment of the people at all but was composed of troublemakers recruited for the express purpose of protecting the privilege of the powerful, which Jesus was threatening. Whether anyone said it or not, the words are one of the sources of the tragedy of anti-Semitism.

Rabbi James Rudin, of the American Jewish Committee, was invited to preach at a Good Friday service in New York City a few years ago, which he did powerfully and eloquently. He acknowledged the centrality of Good Friday to the Christian faith and how its themes and liturgies and music resonate deeply in the Christian soul. And he said that Good Friday is very different for Jews. He told how Good Friday was a day of dread for his grandparents in Eastern Europe. They told him, when he was a child, how "Christians in their villages would rush from their churches at the conclusion of Good Friday services, in countless towns, villages, and cities in Europe . . . as an angry mob to do harm, to rape and murder their Jewish neighbors. . . . 'Christ-killers,' they called out. 'Yids. Kikes. You killed our Lord.'"

"My grandparents were bewildered," Rabbi Rudin says, "by the Christian religion, one that proudly proclaimed universal love and peace, but also a religion that could promote a murderous reaction among its adherents."

It is helpful for us to hear this good rabbi remind us, "Jewish people use a different prism of faith and history and see Jesus on the cross as yet another Jewish victim. . . . Jewish people clearly understand the cry from the heart of a dying kinsman, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' . . . a dying Jew on the occupier's cross" (*Journal for Preachers*, Lent 1995); a cry, from the Twenty-Second Psalm, uttered, whispered, wailed by Jews murdered by Romans in 70 CE, crowded into ghettoes in the Middle Ages, burned by the Inquisition, slaughtered by the Nazis.

Professor Amy Jill Levine teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School; one of her students was Adam Fronczek. She is helping us see how Christian preaching, almost unconsciously, uses anti-Jewish rhetoric. We oversimplify the complex New Testament narratives, generalizing and stereotyping. Not all Jews were legalistic. Not all Pharisees were self-righteous. Not all Jews wanted Jesus crucified. Many loved him, followed him. "Be careful," she pleads with her Christian ministerial students, "in the way you talk about us." When her son was younger, he attended Nashville's Orthodox Jewish Day School. "I'd bring this adorable child in his yarmulke and fringes to my class at Vanderbilt and say, 'When you talk about Jews and Judaism, think about this child. Say nothing that will hurt him, and say nothing that will cause a member of your congregation to hurt him. Do not use Judaism as a foil, do not bear false witness against it, and do not make the gospel of love into a message of hate" (*Context,* February 2008).

Not long after the Jesus incident, Pontius Pilate disappears. There were three violent incidents in which he failed to understand his Jewish subjects and failed to keep the peace. Some think he was recalled, reassigned, perhaps retired early, perhaps sent into exile in the Alps. I have a lot of sympathy for him. Like the other characters in the story—Judas, Peter, James and John—he is so human, so believable. He wasn't a bad man; he just wasn't strong enough to be a good man.

Frederick Buechner writes, "For Pilate, it was not so much the terrible thing he had done as the wonderful thing he had proved incapable of doing" (*Peculiar Treasures*, pp. 137–138).

His story suggests that for all of us there are moments like that, decisions like that, choices like that. They can be costly. The late Robert McAfee Brown, Presbyterian theologian, wrote a little book, *Saying Yes and Saying No*, in which he argued that to say "Yes" to Jesus Christ is to risk taking positions that are not always prudent and popular, and that sometimes are even dangerous. He tells about Pastor Martin Niemöller, who, when Adolph Hitler was turning Germany into a militaristic dictatorship, published a book of sermons, *Christus Ist Mein Führer—Christ Is My Führer/Leader.* It cost him seven years in Dachau. And, of course, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in the name of Jesus Christ, participating in the Resistance and a plot to assassinate Hitler and paying with his life. And Oscar Romero standing up to the state in El Salvador, advocating for the poor, gunned down while celebrating mass. And Martin Luther King Jr., challenging centuries of racism, stirring up violent responses to his dream of racial equality and reconciliation, assassinated. And you and me, confronted daily—in the way we vote and spend our money and take our stands, which may not be popular with the boss, the people at the club, our friends.

There come moments to decide—whether or not to be his man, his woman, moments when it is not possible to remain neutral. Theologian Hans Küng writes, "In the long run it is impossible to be undecided. . . . Not to choose is itself a choice" (*Does God Exist?* p. 437).

The account of the last twenty-four hours in Jesus' life is more than a story. It is, I conclude, a mirror held up to human life, life in the world where it is easy to compromise, to fail to do the right thing, to avoid conflict and controversy—a mirror held up to your life and mine.

And today it brings us to that question a Roman governor once asked publicly but which, in fact, is a deeply personal question to you and to me: "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

It was a tumultuous scene. Religious leaders desperately trying to preserve their privilege; political leaders trying to maintain their authority; the police trying to keep public order; a crowd of people, so easily manipulated, becoming violent; soldiers, bored, doing their job, torturing their prisoner—all of which could well be taken from the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* this morning. And in the middle of all that, all that familiar, human reality, there is one quiet figure whose silent dignity rises above it all, and we begin to see the king, God's man, the savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ.

On foggy nights over a lake in Switzerland a ghost hovers, washing his hands, over and over, saying, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

What shall we, you and I, do with him?

Amen.